DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 175 EA 025 794

AUTHOR Levin, Benjamin
TITLE Schools Coping with a Changing World.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Educational Change; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Organizational Change; Organizational Theories; *Social Change; *Social Environment

ABSTRACT

Changes in society such as unemployment, the economy, crime, violence, families, and technology all affect schools. Schools must understand how these changes in society will have an impact on education and respond appropriately. Schools are similar to other organizations, and research commonly assumes that they change strategically in response to external demands or pressures. However, the process of change is more complex and less focused. There are two problems in studying the interactions between organizations and their environments. First, it is not always clear where the organization ends and the environment begins. Second, many organizations have many diverse environments. Three studies help examine the interaction between organizations and their environments: interviews with 12 secondary school principals; case studies of a school district, a hospital, a government department, and a private-sector company; and case studies of 5 school districts. The studies revealed that educators believe that nearly everything happening in the school environment is important to education. However, they have no structured way of learning about the external world. Also, educators are often overwhelmed by environmental change and have difficulty responding to it. There are steps educators can take to more efficiently understand and deal with environmental change. (Contains 63 references.) (JPT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 369 175

SCHOOLS COPING WITH A CHANGING WORLD

Paper Presented to the
American Educational Research Association
Session 15.41
New Orleans
April 5, 1994

Benjamin Levin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Dept. of Educational Administration and Foundations
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB
R3T 2N2
Ph. (204) 474-8236
Fax (204) 275-5962
E-mail: levin@cc.umanitoba.ca

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Levin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

EA025794

SCHOOLS COPING WITH A CHANGING WORLD[1]

Abstract

This paper uses several recent empirical studies to investigate the ways in which schools and school systems understand and respond to changes in the broader society. The evidence suggests that schools as organizations are ill-equipped either to understand or respond to such external changes in substantive ways. This is so even though external pressures are often the real drivers of change in schools, and even though these pressures are intensifying and diversifying. School administrators understand the importance of changing social conditions but do not have adequate means to understand and respond to these changes. School administrators could take specific actions to improve their capacities in these areas.

Introduction

Youth unemployment, economic restructuring, AIDS, crime, violence, changing family structures, budget deficits, information technology, increased litigation, aboriginal self-government, child abuse, environmental degradation: ask a group of educators about the sorts of changes that are having an impact on schools today, and these are some of the responses. Educators are keenly aware that schools exist in a world that is changing rapidly in many ways, and that these changes have important consequences for children and for their education. Every classroom teacher sees these issues in his or her students; every administrator confronts them in the needs and demands of staff, parents and students.

The same issues also reach us through a relentless bombardment from the media. Newspapers and electronic media frequently feature stories on the changes taking place in and around schools. And the professional literature of education is rife with calls, from a variety of political standpoints, for schools to change in response to a changing society. Some argue for higher standards and more testing to respond to global economic competition. Others argue for more sensitivity towards various minorities or for a focus on critical thinking. Still others advocate schooling that is much more technological in conformity to the prevalence of information technology elsewhere in our lives. The call for schools to adapt is strong, if not very united.

---

[1]. The research reported in this paper was funded by grants from the University of Manitoba Social Sciences and Humanities Research Fund, the Strategic Grants Program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Centre for Management Development, and the General Research Grants Program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The opinions expressed are those of the author only. I thank J.A. Riffel for helpful comments on an earlier version.

At the same time, many think that schools are not changing enough. An ongoing theme in the education literature is the persistence of many central features of schooling despite both a changing environment and a sustained efforts to change schools (for example, Cohen, 1992; Cuban, 1988, 1990; Economic Council, 1992; Goodlad, 1984).

Although much has been written, largely in a normative vein, about the alleged failure of schools to adapt to a changing world, there is relatively little empirical work on the question of how schools understand and respond to the changes they face. The exhortations to schools to change are not matched by research on how schools actually try to cope with their environments. Do schools understand and accept the pressures on them? If not, why not? If so, are schools unwilling to change or unable to do so, or are the critics misunderstanding the reality of the institutions? In this paper I use findings from three studies to construct a picture of the process through which schools and school systems do the work of developing an understanding of the world they inhabit, determining what responses may be required, and putting those responses in place.

Theoretical framework

This paper, and the research on which it is based, grow out of a theoretical framework which sees organizations as complex entities in which there are always multiple agendas, reasons, actions and understandings at work. A common assumption in the literature is that organizational change occurs in response to some external demand, pressure or requirement, as mediated through the perceptions of people in an organization (Levin,1993a; Starbuck, 1976; Warriner, 1984). Much of the textbook literature portrays this process as a strategic one, in which signals from the environment are interpreted in the organization and appropriate responses developed. However my belief is that these processes are more complex, more diverse, and less focused than the textbook description.

Limitations

A discussion of school system - environment relations is rendered more difficult by several basic conceptual problems.

First, the distinction between organizations and environments is a problematic one. For most organizations it is not clear where the boundaries should be drawn. Are parents, for example, part of the school system or part of its environment? What about students? non-parent taxpayers? teachers' unions? community organizations? lobby groups? textbook publishers? Where we draw the boundaries will depend in large measure on what our purposes are.

> ...one cannot be a subject of an environment, one can only be a participant. The very distinction between self and non-self breaks down

At the same time, many think that schools are not changing enough. An ongoing theme in the education literature is the persistence of many central features of schooling despite both a changing environment and a sustained efforts to change schools (for example, Cohen, 1992; Cuban, 1988, 1990; Economic Council, 1992; Goodlad, 1984).

Although much has been written, largely in a normative vein, about the alleged failure of schools to adapt to a changing world, there is relatively little empirical work on the question of how schools understand and respond to the changes they face. The exhortations to schools to change are not matched by research on how schools actually try to cope with their environments. Do schools understand and accept the pressures on them? If not, why not? If so, are schools unwilling to change or unable to do so, or are the critics misunderstanding the reality of the institutions? In this paper I use findings from three studies to construct a picture of the process through which schools and school systems do the work of developing an understanding of the world they inhabit, determining what responses may be required, and putting those responses in place.

Theoretical framework

This paper, and the research on which it is based, grow out of a theoretical framework which sees organizations as complex entities in which there are always multiple agendas, reasons, actions and understandings at work. A common assumption in the literature is that organizational change occurs in response to some external demand, pressure or requirement, as mediated through the perceptions of people in an organization (Levin,1993a; Starbuck, 1976; Warriner, 1984). Much of the textbook literature portrays this process as a strategic one, in which signals from the environment are interpreted in the organization and appropriate responses developed. However my belief is that these processes are more complex, more diverse, and less focused than the textbook description.

Limitations

A discussion of school system - environment relations is rendered more difficult by several basic conceptual problems.

First, the distinction between organizations and environments is a problematic one. For most organizations it is not clear where the boundaries should be drawn. Are parents, for example, part of the school system or part of its environment? What about students? non-parent taxpayers? teachers' unions? community organizations? lobby groups? textbook publishers? Where we draw the boundaries will depend in large measure on what our purposes are.

> ...one cannot be a subject of an environment, one can only be a participant. The very distinction between self and non-self breaks down

> cold. The environment surrounds, enfolds, engulfs, and no thing and no one can be isolated and identified as standing outside of, and apart from it...one cannot observe an environment; rather the organism explores it (Ittelson, 1973, pp. 74-75).

Second, it is not at all evident that organizations have single environments. Various commentators have tried to distinguish between various types of environemts, such as task environments, political environments, or resource environments. People with different roles in the organization may face different environments; for top management resources may be a key issue, while for front-line staff changes in the clientele may be much more significant. Accountants may see the environment quite differently from research scientists in the same organization.

Third, the concept of successful adaptation to change is troublesome. What would it mean for schools to adapt successfully to a changing world? Is successful adaptation signalled by the organization's continuing to exist? If so, schools must be considered successful; they are today as significant an institution as they have ever been despite the criticism. Many critics of schooling contend that schools have adapted too well, and so fail to challenge or confront the less desirable aspects of our lives. Insofar as schools are institutions concerned with improving people, then some degree of deliberate tension between schools and the larger society seems essential.

These problems suggest that the common language of organizations, environments and adaptation is inadequate. Yet we lack an accepted alternative.

Do organizations adapt?

There is no agreement in the literature on what the environments of organizations actually are. The problem of boundaries between organizations and environments has already been noted, but this is not the only conceptual difficulty. A body of research focuses on the supposed characteristics of the environment itself, such as turbulence or munificence, in the belief that organizations could determine strategy if they could understand their environment correctly. Attempts have been made to construct measures of environmental conditions that could be used to predict organizational responses (Aldrich, 1979; Corwin, 1984; Jurkovich, 1974; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). However there is no consensus among researchers as to how to describe or characterize environments of organizations (Levin, 1993a; Morgan, 1986).

The literature contains two basic schools of thought on organizational responses to external change. One, found in most of the conventional management literature in education and in other fields emphasizes the role of human action in overcoming the challenges of external change (e.g. Hoy & Miskel, 1987). This approach gives primacy to the role of managers in leading their organizations to successful adaptation. Good leadership leads to success, it is argued. Much of the current popular literature on management and on education takes this perspective.

A second orientation emphasizes the limits of human and organizational capacity to adapt (e.g. Aldrich, 1979; Warriner, 1984). Kaufman notes that "... organizations by and large are not capable of more than marginal changes, while the environment is so volatile that marginal changes are frequently insufficient to assure survival" (1985, p. 47). Some authors have argued that circumstances such as accidents or crises can also have powerful impacts on organizations, often acting as the triggers for substantive change (Corwin, 1987; Dror, 1986; 1992; Miller, 1990). Others stress the ways in which organizations and managers fail to be responsive and adaptive. The social setting of the organization, and its traditions and practices may affect its external relationships, often unknowingly (McKall & Kaplan, 1985; Morgan, 1986). Work in social psychology points out the limits of human capacity to understand highly complex systems or events, suggesting that most people are largely incapable of coping with the world they inhabit except in highly simplified form (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982).

The literature in educational administration has placed considerably more emphasis on the importance of human action than on the limits of our capacity to change (Fullan, 1991; Ogawa, 1991; Wills, 1991). Given earlier comments on the degree to which schools are seen as unchanged in the face of enormous pressures and considerable efforts, there is reason to doubt the efficacy of such interventions. One might well take the view that the most important changes in education occur not through planned efforts of educators, but from actions of external bodies such as governments, and even more from larger social forces in the economy and society. For example, changes in youth unemployment rates have direct consequences for school enrollments; as unemployment rises so do the numbers of people staying in or returning to high school. The advent of computers in the home and workplace and the home has had far more impact on the computer skills of the population than has anything done by schools. Changing views about ethnic identity and the place of minorities have led to a great deal of conflict in schools. One could extend considerably this list of areas in which schools have been in the position of, as a respondent in one of the studies described later put it, "scrambling to keep up" (Levin, 1991, 1992).

How do organizations learn about their environments?

The disagreement in the literature about the extent to which organizations adapt successfully is matched by differences as to how organizations go about understanding and responding to their environments. Most commentators take the position that understanding of the environment is mediated or constructed at least to some degree by the organization itself. The strongest versions of constructivism argue that people in organizations create or select their own environments, and that internal organizational processes are more important in understanding response to the environment than are characteristics of the environment itself (Starbuck, 1976; Hedberg 1981; Silverman, 1970).

Previous research also indicates that the creation of meaning in organizations is affected by a multitude of factors both inside and outside the organization. Individual dispositions, backgrounds and interests can be important as personality and training may predispose people to see issues in particular ways. Role and place in the organization also shape individuals' responses to external forces (Keisler & Sproull, 1982; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Much depends on organizational structures and processes such as policy-making and communication systems (March, 1991), organizational history (March & Olsen, 1989), and prevailing ideas in the organization (Daft & Huber, 1987; McKall & Kaplan, 1985; Morgan, 1986). It is well known that aspects of organization can have strong influences on ideas and behaviour. Also important, though often neglected in research, are prevailing ideas in the society more generally (Antaki, 1981; Martin, 1992). All these elements interact in complex ways to create an organizational worldview, or perhaps more often multiple and competing organizational worldviews. Their implications are discussed more fully in relation to the findings of our own studies.

A rich body of work in organization theory has illuminated the contextual and contingent nature of organizational functioning. Ideas of "the garbage can" (Cohen, March & Olson, 1972), emergent strategy (Mintzberg & Jorgensen, 1987), "fuzzy gambling" (Dror, 1986), "the permanently failing organization" (Meyer & Zucker, 1989) and "the logic of confidence" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) are all strands of a research tradition which stresses the complexity, limitations and unpredictability of human behaviour in organizations (see also Morgan 1986 and Wilson, 1989). Recent work in neo-institutionalism (March & Olsen, 1989; Wilson, 1989) stresses the impact of organizational structures and practices as both shaping and limiting human intentionality. The research reported in this paper grows from these roots.

Empirical base

This paper presents ideas and conclusions drawn from three studies I have conducted with various colleagues over the past three years. All of the studies have been conducted collaboratively with the persons or organizations being studied. For example, in all the studies data were returned to respondents for review and discussion with the researchers. Elements of this participative research process are described more fully in Levin, 1993b.

The first study, referred to here as the principal interview study, involved interviews with a dozen secondary school principals in a large Canadian city (Rae & Brandon, 1991). The semi-structured interviews probed the external issues which the principals saw as most important for their schools, asked about their sources of knowledge about these issues, and investigated their views as to how and how well schools were responding. Interviews were typically about an hour and were tape-recorded. Written accounts of the interviews were prepared and sent to the respondents for review and comment. These accounts were a combination of detailed

paraphrasing and direct quotations, but not as complete as a verbatim transcript. For example, everything was reported in complete sentences and duplicate material was removed. This technique was adopted to allow respondents to focus on the content of what they had said rather than being concerned about their grammar.

A second, externally funded study, referred to here as the comparative organizational study, involved case studies of four organizations - a school district, a hospital, a government department, and a private sector company. Some of the results have been reported in Levin, 1991, 1992, 1993a; Levin & Thomas 1992a, 1992b. The school district has about 9000 students and is located in the suburbs of a large Canadian city. The hospital is a very large tertiary care institution providing a wide range of highly specialized services and employing some 5000 people. The government department is a large agency of the Government of Canada, headquartered in Ottawa but with substantial regional operations as well, and working in a policy area that has been changing very rapidly. The department has about 12,000 staff and spending authority for many billions of dollars annually. The private sector company is one of Canada's largest financial services organizations with thousands of employees and billions of dollars in sales annually.

Over a period of 18 months, document analysis, interviews and some observations were used to develop a picture of the ways in which managers in these organizations understood their external environments, the issues they saw as important, the degree of consensus on these issues, the sources of their knowledge about issues, the way the organization handled the issues, and the link between managers' perceptions and the organizations' action agendas. The same process of interview, written account and review was used. The researchers' initial findings were reported to each of the participating organizations and used as the basis for further discussion with them about the issues under study. We met with groups of managers in each organization to discuss our preliminary findings. Towards the end of the study we brought people from all four organizations together to discuss their perceptions of the study's results. A particularly interesting feature of this study was the extent to which the environments of the participating organizations changed even while the study was underway.

A third, externally funded research program, referred to as the school system study, is currently underway. It focuses on understanding school systems' responses to social change and is using two main approaches. Five case studies are being done similar to those in the comparative organizational study but dealing only with school districts. The five districts include urban, suburban, semi-rural, rural and aboriginal jurisdictions in a Canadian province. Data sources include document analysis, interviews, observation, and dialogue with the districts based on the data being gathered. A second part of the project involves three specific issues - child poverty, information technology, and changes in the labour force. A combination of interviews and questionnaires are being used to assess the ways in which these issues are understood by educational administrators and policy makers, their sources of

knowledge about them, and their view of the steps schools are taking and should take to respond to them.

Findings

Two important caveats need to be entered before providing results of the studies. First, the words and beliefs of our respondents in the various studies have essentially been removed in this account. I have reconstructed the data to fit my conceptual structure of analysis and the requirements of an academic paper. Although this may provide useful insight, it does mean that the organizations studied have been obscured; the conceptual structures and history embedded in each organization have, in a sense, been violated, as they are taken them from their contexts and fitted into one of my devising. Since, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) observe, we are "storytelling organisms who...lead storied lives," research which deprives the subjects of research of their voice may both deny the collaborative nature of research and remove the signifier from the signified.

The study findings are also presented as generalizations about school systems. This serves to hide the important variability both within and among the organizations we have studied. Each organization has its unique situation and its unique set of people. It is important to try to draw more general conclusions, but just as important not to overstate the degree of convergence or to understate the differences among people and organizations.

To try to remedy these problems I have included a section of comments and vignettes drawn from our studies between the discussion of findings and the conclusion of the paper.

Data from the studies are discussed under three main headings - the shape of the environment (what is seen as important); the process of understanding the environment; and the process of responding to a changing environment. These categories, while conceptually useful, also have the effect of diverting attention from the extent to which all aspects of understanding and responding are interrelated, within schools and other organizations.

The shape of the environment

Educators identify a very large number of external issues that have implications for schools. When asked to brainstorm such a list, groups of educators easily produced 40 or 50 issues which they saw as having an impact on schools, including such diverse matters as demographic shifts, changes in information handling, inflation rates, changes in trade patterns, environmental changes, and housing patterns, to name only a few (Levin, 1991). In one sense, almost everything that happens in the world has potential relevance to education. Recent work by Fris and Balderson (1988) and Leithwood, Cousins and Smith (1990) has also found

school administrators' identifying a very wide range of issues or problems as being important for schools. Respondents do not organize their description of the environment into categories in the way that researchers do.

The variety of issues is accompanied by a lack of consensus among trustees and administrators as to which issues are the most important for schools. In the principal interview study, only two external issues - lack of funding and increasing ethnic diversity - were spontaneously identified by as many as seven of the 12 respondents as being particularly important for schools (Rae & Brandon, 1991). Even when common issues are identified, they can be invested with quite different meanings (Levin, 1992). In each of the school systems studied, we have found large differences in opinion both among and between trustees, superintendents and principals as to which issues were really important for the division and what those issues meant. For example, one person may see ethnic diversity as something to be overcome, while another sees it as a feature to be celebrated. We found much more consensus in each of the three non-school organizations in the comparative organizational study. Either schools are particularly open to a wide variety of external pressures or they are not very good at developing a broadly-shared organizational view of the challenges facing them. Yet without some agreement on central issues, there can be no effective pursuit of an overall organizational strategy.

The process of understanding

Although educators feel that they are under pressure from external changes, their knowledge about the external world is often limited and impressionistic, and they do not tend to invest time or resources in any structured way to obtain better information (Levin, 1993a; Maynes, 1990). A review of school board agendas and minutes, and senior administration team minutes in the five districts in the school system study reveals that these systems do not have a systematic way of investigating the external world. The overwhelming majority of issues on the agendas are internal matters such as budgets, staffing, or program decisions. Where external issues do appear, they usually come from an external source such as a parent delegation or a related agency.

School systems rely on a narrow range of information sources to learn about the external world. Formal strategic planning processes with their elements of environmental scanning, common in some kinds of organizations, are rare in schools. Unlike many U.S. school districts, those we have studied in Canada do not have or use data on the demographics of their students or populations, even though such data are available readily from Statistics Canada. School systems devote few resources to analyzing their activities in a methodical manner; impressions seem to carry more weight than data. Program review does take place, but generally through informal processes such as staff committees. Administrators in schools tend to be in their schools much of the time, and tend to have the great bulk of their communication with their superiors or with teachers on their staff. Superintendents, too, interact

mostly with staff in their systems or related external bodies such as funders and regulators.

Instead of formal processes of information-gathering, schools rely greatly on informal contact with students and parents (Rae & Brandon, 1991; Fris & Balderson, 1988). The principals we interviewed said unanimously that they learned about community changes from their personal experience and from what teachers told them about students and their families. Although they had a great deal of contact with students, only two of them referred to students as an important source of information (Rae & Brandon, 1991). Information often comes to administrators, then, as filtered by teachers, who themselves rarely ask students directly but instead make inferences based on students' behaviour (Wills & Peterson, 1992). By the time recommendations reach school boards, they may be based on third or fourth hand information.

It might be most accurate to describe issue identification as something which happens in organizations rather than as something that people set out to do (McKall & Kaplan, 1985). Most people do not go about looking for issues, or even seeking to validate the possibilities which occur to them. Daft and Huber (1987) contend that managers are typically trying to reduce uncertainty, rather than look for evidence which would increase it.

However, compared with the other organizations in the comparative organizational study, schools appear to be particularly informal in their attention to external issues. The government department we studied spent considerable time and energy collecting and distributing to managers information about both its own services and the larger context in which it operated. Planning sessions were frequent. Rapid changes in the political environment often rendered the outcomes of planning irrelevant, which led to cynicism in the civil service. Nonetheless, the department made consistent effort to get on top of its situation, to formulate and implement a large-scale agenda for change. The financial services company had the most impressive external focus of the four organizations we studied, with highly sophisticated information systems and planning processes to which there was strong executive commitment. The hospital had made various efforts to establish a strategic agenda but often found these foiled by changes in government directions and by internal conflicts.

Trustees and school administrators do not necessarily have a cognitive 'map' to structure the external world (Shavelson, 1988). Relatively few school administrators displayed to us a sophisticated understanding of the nature or impact of changes in their students and communities. Larger issues such as economic or demographic change tend to get less attention even though they are critically important.

Our data lead me to believe that the way in which people in an organization come to define issues is shaped to a considerable extent by a prevailing climate of opinion or thinking in a field of service, as well as in a given organization. Some

issues become catchy, are given wide circulation, and are taken up in some form by many individuals, whether these issues are well understood and particularly a propos or not. When an issue has been given considerable public prominence - for example through media coverage or some sort of important policy document - it is more likely to be mentioned as important even if the respondents have only a partial sense of the underlying dimensions. For example, there is a growing awareness that issues of cultural diversity are important for education. Most educators will identify this issue, but fewer will be able to talk about the nature and implications of the issue in a meaningful way. Edelman's (1988) excellent analysis of the way in which issues emerge symbolically in politics is also applicable to education. Although our respondents did not usually identify the mass media as a source of knowledge, I believe that the media play a large role in shaping school administrators' perceptions of the world around them and in reinforcing superficial understandings of issues.

Many school administrators and trustees are aware of these problems. Almost all the principals in the principal interview study said spontaneously that schools do not anticipate change very well and are consequently always having to react, and that schools need to do better in seeing the big picture. They suggested that the school system was resistant to change and responded poorly to environmental pressures: schools and school systems were seen as particularly weak at predicting or planning for change. But there seems to be little sense of how to improve. Any optimism that was expressed spoke of local change at the level of the individual school or individual teacher (Rae & Brandon, 1991). In the case studies of school districts, the picture is less pessimistic. Opinion is split among both trustees and administrators between those who see the schools as doing pretty well in keeping up, and those who feel that schools are falling further and further behind social change. Trustees are rather more positive in this regard than are superintendents.

The response to external pressures

There can be no doubt that educators feel besieged - even overwhelmed - by the pressures facing them. Almost universally those in our studies speak about the increasing and diversify pressures on schools, the multiple and often inconsistent demands, the increasing needs of students coupled with what they see as declining support from the community (Rae & Brandon, 1991).

There is often a gap, however, between identifying issues and responding to them. Many issues defined as important by at least some of our respondents do not have a prominent place on the organization's formal agenda. Official documents such as school board minutes or senior administrative group minutes contain few references to issues such as changing demography, economic restructuring or to pressures from the public even though trustees and administrators say when asked that these are important.

Instead, the ongoing work of school systems is dominated by day to day pressures and operational needs. These may or may not be linked to larger-scale

issues and trends. For example, finance was mentioned as an important external issue by all respondents in one district partly because, at the time of the interviews, the district had just finished going through a difficult budget reduction exercise necessitated by lower-than-expected grants from the Province. In other cases, much time and effort goes to issues which most participants regard as relatively unimportant, but which are seen to be required to keep things going, such as the approval of accounts or contracts, or discussions on transportation. Business as usual dominates, even when many of those involved are aware that there is something wrong with that orientation.

Because educational administrators and trustees typically did not speak to us in terms of a frame for explaining and understanding large scale changes, they are hard-pressed to shape an overall response. The lack of an overall analytic view means that demands tend to be seen one at a time, not linked or put into an agenda. The focus may shift away from really significant changes towards those that happen to be articulated politically. In the principal interview study, most of the respondents mentioned issues that were short term and local rather than long term and national or global in scope. The districts in our school system study appear to spend more time discussing transportation routes than changing family structures. And where these larger issues do arise, they tend to be discussed without any action or resolution - as problems that are beyond the capacity of schools to cope with.

Partly as a result, school administrators tend to see changes not as systemic challenges but as problems or threats which disrupt existing routines. The most common response is to try to recreate the status quo so that routines can remain unchanged. School systems appear to have a standard repertoire of responses to perceived changes around them. While the environmental issues change swiftly, the responses remain largely the same as they have been; programs are added for specific needs; specialists are hired to deal with a particular issue; efforts are made to improve communication with the immediate community. Trustees and administrators speak of allocating additional resources to the problem, or of providing professional development for staff to cope with a problem (Wills, 1991; Wills & Peterson, 1992). Changes often focus on marginalized populations - e.g. special programs for minorities - not on mainstream activities, or they may focus on marginal improvements in current practice rather than lasting change. Many changes, though they require enormous effort, make very little difference in the long run; the scale of change doesn't fit the scale of the problems.

The dominance of operational concerns means that issues which may be seen as important, but do not arise on a day to day basis, will have a much lower action priority. A good example of such an issue is the use of information technology in schools. There is widespread agreement in the literature that developments in information technology have very direct implications not only for the process of schooling, but also for the nature of the labour force for which we are ostensibly preparing our students (e.g. Henchey, 1987; Canada, 1991a, 1991b). Yet only a few

respondents in any of our studies cited information technology as a major external pressure. When we asked specifically about it, the general response was that there was no real pressure to move in this area. Action in this area was seen to come from the initiative of interested people within the system.

A significant number of administrators and policy makers also express a strong sense that these responses are not adequate. Paradoxically, there is at one and the same time agreement on how an administrator might respond to environmental pressure and discontent with the efficacy of these responses. "This is how one responds" the administrators seem to say, "even though it doesn't work very well." Again, there is awareness of a problem without a good sense of how to tackle it.

Our respondents speak

Before drawing conclusions from the research, it seems important to hear at least something from the people in the organizations we have studied, to give at least some voice to those living with the issues I have identified.

A senior manager in a government department:

> ...we recognize that the policies we developed in the 60s and 70s to make the industry run are increasingly irrelevant, outmoded, or outdated, because of the way technology and markets have evolved... So what you are up against now... is a set of institutions that are now basically outmoded.
>
> This institution is, like very other institution, solving last year's problems.

A secondary school principal, speaking about the range of issues facing him:

> At times you just throw your hand in the air... but it's not that bad, until you start thinking about them. They don't affect you all at once.

Another principal on the same theme:

> Teachers feel beleaguered... Teachers don't know where kids will go when they graduate, or what kind of future to prepare them for... There's a lot of free-floating anxiety among teachers.

A manager in a government department, talking about implementing change:

> When 7000 out of 11000 people are inspectors, they are used to following black and white outlines of how things are done. The policy area... is a shock to their system.

A school superintendent:

> There is a strong sense of community that is fundamental in communicating with one another. Our district is smaller and therefore it is easier to keep tabs on what is happening and what needs to be responded to.

A hospital vice-president:

> I think there is consensus [in our organization] in what the organization looks like. I do not think there is consensus as to which are the real monsters. I would guess that you would be hearing from some colleagues about rapidly changing technology... From my perspective, though, those are less difficult to manage, and less significant external factors, than the totally shifting infrastructure in relation to the patient.

A school superintendent:

> ...the change in the availability of funds has forced us to learn to think differently... Until we learn to think of innovative approaches within a milieu of restraint, the change is negative because it limits the system and the way we think about ourselves. From an abstract point of view, I don't think the limitation is a necessary one. I do find, however, that it is sometimes difficult to persuade people to change, and to discard old ways of approaching things.

A senior manager in a financial services company:

> In retrospect, looking at what those problems are, identifying them, sharing them with the proper people, and identifying what to do about them is not what the problem is. The problem is selling it to the organization. That is the hard part... The operational executives... will not be coerced, they will not be told what to do, and they will not be given orders.

A school trustee:

> I think we are trying to be proactive, recognizing that this change is coming or here in many areas. We can not just wait for it to happen. So, yes, I would say that we are being proactive. We recognize that at a divisional level we have to be proactive to facilitate change. My sense is that at the high school level there is a certain comfort level and there

may some resistance from some segments. At the board level and at the senior administrative level, it is our responsibility to be proactive, and I think we are.

Conclusions

The school systems we have studied are largely inward-looking organizations with a focus on immediate pressures and interests. They are not well organized to examine, analyze and act on issues that are of broad scope and long term significance, even though these issues may have great implications for education. Moreover, it is not clear that analysis leads to knowledge or that knowledge leads to action.

Drawing these conclusions does not lead me to call for the usual nostrums of stronger leadership or better practice. The reality is that it is extraordinarily difficult to direct an organization's attention in a focused and sustained manner towards the essential challenges it may face. Such efforts have to counteract several powerful and seemingly automatic tendencies in organizational life. These include the tendency to be preoccupied with the day to day and immediate (frequently noted in the literature on school administration), the tendency to see issues in narrow and simplistic terms, the need to deal with the many conflicting agendas which may be found in an organization, and the tendency to see the future as a linear extension of the past. Unanticipated or random events can wreak havoc with even the best strategy. Dror has an extensive and compelling discussion of these problems, including "a high objective probability of low-probability events occurring frequently. In subjective terms, surprise dominates" (1986, p. 168). Even in an organization in which there is a very high level of commitment by many people to a common direction, the diversions are many. They are impossible to avoid and very difficult to manage. Despite all the exhortations in the literature, the big picture is constantly being swamped by all the little pictures which are also around at the same time.

If school systems exhibit certain characteristics, then it is usually because there have been forces pushing them to do so. One of the worst features of many calls for reform in education is their lack of grounding in a thorough appreciation of the realities of the system as it exists. It isn't that school administrators and policy-makers are ignorant or lack good intentions (though this will sometimes be the case). Many of those we have studied are only too aware of the deficiencies in current practice. The problem is knowing what to do about them. The obstacles are significant, and they are not going to disappear, which means that school administrators will continue to face multiple, contradictory and difficult pressures.

Implications for practice

While perfection is not within reach, there are some steps that educational leaders can take. I have benefitted in thinking about these problems particularly from the work of James March and Yehezkel Dror, both of whom are able to reconcile an

unflinching look at the limits of people and organizations with optimism about what might be done. Most of the suggestions here involve trying to develop characteristics of the so-called learning organization (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Levitt & March, 1988). Among the possibilities are:

- Broaden the range and sources (but not necessarily the amount) of information within the organization. Draw in ideas from a wide variety of sources, including those not traditionally used in schools. Disseminating cartoons, poems, or research reports instead of memos may have some effect. So might inviting into the organization people from diverse fields of activity so as to broaden the range of ideas to which staff are exposed. As one respondent in our comparative organizational study put it, if you want to change people's ideas, change who they have lunch with.

- Structure time for thinking. A senior manager in the financial services company we studied said that his greatest problem was to get people to stop doing things, put their feet up, and think. Most organizations reward activity, whether it is useful or not. Opportunity has to be made for activities that do not have immediate effects but may, in the longer term, affect the organization's work.

- Foster open debate as well as common vision. Amidst all the calls for a unified vision in organizations we may forget the importance of the iconoclast and dissenter. A vision has to be more than commonly held - it has to be right. Most organizations act to suppress dissent; a few leaders tolerate it, but very few encourage it. Too much dissent can paralyse action. Yet active dissent is critical to organizational learning. If everyone is saying the same things, there is nothing to learn. Here, as elsewhere, a balance has to be achieved, difficult though that may be.

- Plan, but don't rely only on planning. Aaron Wildavsky wrote that "if planning is everything, maybe it's nothing" (Wildavksy, 1973). Planning is neither everything nor nothing. Good planning has an important contribution to make, since it is a process that may focus attention on the big, long-term issues that are otherwise neglected. Planning may also be a way of structuring time for thinking. But no plan will solve all the problems, and some plans create many problems.

- Foster and support alternatives. Most organizations emphasize standard procedures even if they don't work very well. The limited range of responses schools tend to have to external demands is an instance. More could be done to legitimate alternatives within an organization, to avoid the "we all have to do it the same way" syndrome, and thus to encourage experiment and learning.

- See crises as opportunities. Learning occurs when something is different, and crisis means difference. Issues that cannot be raised in good times can be put directly on the table when danger threatens. Crisis can easily lead to disaster, but it can also provide the opportunity for improvement (Dror, 1992).

- Upset the apple-cart sometimes. Organizations need some sense of stability, but sometimes turning things upside down is the best way to see them differently. Many years ago James March (1973) called for more playfulness in organizations. Though the conditions facing schools do not encourage a sense of play, it may be

more important now than ever before to regain that imagination. Changes in communication patterns, in formats of events, in any of the everyday practices of organizations can be used to help people think again about what we do and why.

Like all recommendations, these are easier to suggest than to implement. Many of them involve delicate problems of balance. They may depart significantly from the standard model of organization most of us are used to. But there are no simple solutions to the problems of organization.

Implications for theory and research

Much of the exhortatory literature in educational administration is, if not doing an active disservice, at least not being very helpful. Every article or book that lays out some series of steps or actions leading to the achievement of all that the organization wants disguises the true difficulty of the problem, and distracts attention from the long-term view that is required. Moreover, a great deal of this advice is not based on careful empirical work.

Research on organizational adaptation to external change needs to reflect the complexities of life in organizations. We must move beyond the simple models that attribute everything to the behaviour of managers. More empirical work is needed examining the interactions between people, problems, and settings, and the ways in which internal and external factors influence each other.

The training of administrators also needs to achieve a better reconciliation of the rhetoric of leadership with the realities of organizations. I applaud the redirection of attention in administrator preparation in education towards important issues of organizational purposes and achievements. Nothing will be accomplished if people have no direction or agenda. (As a digression, the accusation that administrator preparation programs in universities still fail to focus on the right issues exemplifies the difficulties in changing institutional practices even when there is some agreement on what needs to be done.)

At the same time, simply to stress the need for leadership is, as has been said, not very helpful. We do no service by making educational administrators believe that they can and should singlehandedly transform their organizations into single-purpose, goal-driven entities. It takes extraordinary skill and talent, and large doses of good fortune, to be able to move significantly in this direction. Our schools need administrators who understand the difficulty of the undertaking, yet are still committed to the attempt. And that is a very tall order indeed!

REFERENCES

Aldrich, H. (1979). **Organizations and Environments.** Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Antaki, C. (1981). **The Psychology of Ordinary Explanations of Social Behavior.**

London: Academic Press.

Argyris, C.& Schon, D. (1978). **Organization Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective.** Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Canada. (1991a). **Learning Well...Living Well**. Draft discussion paper of the Minister of Employment and Immigration.

Canada. (1991b). **Prosperity Through Competitiveness.** Draft discussion paper issued by the Minister of Trade.

Cohen, D. (1992). Policy and practice: The relations between governance and instruction. In G. Grant (Ed.), **Review .of Research in Education, 18** (pp. 3-49). Washington: American Educational Research Association.

Cohen, M., March, J. & Olson, J. (1972). A garbage can model of organizational choice. **Administrative Science Quarterly**, 17(1), 1-25.

Connelly, M. & Clandinin, J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. **Educational Reseacher**, 19(5), 2-15.

Corwin, R. (1987). **The Organization-Society Nexus: A Critical Review of Models and Metaphors.** New York: Greenwood Press.

Cuban, L. (1988). A fundamental puzzle of school reform. **Phi Delta Kappan**, 69(5), 341-344.

Cuban, L. (1990). Reforming again, again, and again. **Educational Researcher** 19(1), 3-13.

Daft, R. & Huber, G. (1987). How organizations learn. In DiTomaso, N. & Bacharach, S. (Eds.) **Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 5**. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Dror, Y. (1986). **Policymaking Under Adversity.** New York: Transaction Books.

Dror, Y. (1992). Israel will go in traumas. **Jerusalem Journal of International Relations**, 14(4), 60-84.

Economic Council of Canada. (1992). **A Lot to Learn**. Ottawa; Minister of Supply and Services.

Edelman, M. (1988). **Constructing the Political Spectacle**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fiol, C.M. & Lyles, M. (1985). Organizational learning. **Academy of Management Review**, 10(4), 808-813.

Fris, J. & Balderson, J. (1988). Leaders' priorities and the congruity imperative. **Alberta Journal of Educational Research**, 34(4), 375-389.

Fullan, M. (1991). **The New Meaning of Educational Change**. New York: Teachers College Press/ OISE Press.

Goodlad, J. (1984). **A Place Called School.** New York: McGraw-Hill.

Goldring, E. (1992, Oct.). Principals as environmental leaders. Paper presented to the University Council on Educational Administration, Minneapolis.

Hedberg, B. (1981). How organizations learn and unlearn. In Nystrom, Paul, and William Starbuck (Eds.) (1981). **Handbook of Organizational Design** (pp. 3-28). New York: Oxford University Press 3-28.

Henchey, N. (1987). The new technology and the transformation of learning. In R.

Ghosh and D. Ray (eds.) **Social Change and Education in Canada**. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Hodgkinson, H. (1993). American education: The good, the bad and the task. **Phi Delta Kappan**, 74(8), 619-625.

Hoy, W., & Miskel, C. (1987). **Educational Administration: Theory, Research and Practice, Third Edition.** New York: Random House.

Ittelson, W. (ed.) **Environmental Cognition**. New York: Seminar Press.

Jurkovich, R (1974). A core typology of organizational environments. **Administrative Science Quarterly**,18, 380-394.

Kaufman, H. (1985). **Time, Chance and Organizations: Natural Selection in a Perilous Environment.** Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.

Kiesler, S. & Sproull, L. (1982). Managerial response to changing environments: Perspectives on problem sensing from social cognition. **Administrative Science Quarterly,** 27, 548-570.

Leithwood, K.; Cousins, B., & Smith, G. (1990). Principals' problem solving: types of problems encountered. **Canadian School Executive**, 9(7). 9-12.

Levin, B. (1991). Understanding changing environments. Paper presented to the Canadian Association for the Study of Educational Administration, Kingston, June.

Levin, B. (1992). Coping with a changing world. In E. Miklos & E. Ratsoy (eds.), **Educational Leadership: Challenge and Change** (pp. 41-62). Edmonton: University of Alberta Department of Educational Administration.

Levin, B. (1993a). School response to a changing environment. **Journal of Educational Administration**, 31(2), 4-21.

Levin, B. (1993b). Doing collaborative research in and with organizations. **International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education**, 6, 331-340.

Levin, B. & Thomas, P. (1992a, Sept.). Understanding a changing world in the public sector. Paper presented to the Institute of Public Administration of Canada, Winnipeg.

Levin, B. & Thomas, P. (1992b). **Understanding and managing a changing environment: A case study of Agriculture Canada**. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development.

Levitt, B. & March, J. (1988). Organizational learning. **Annual Review of Sociology**, 14, 319-340.

Lieberman, Ann, and Lynne Miller (1984). **Teachers, Their World, and Their Work**. Washington: ASCD.

March, J. (1973). Model bias in social action. **Review of Educational Research**, 42, 413-429.

March, J. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in education. Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, April.

March, J. & Olsen, J. (1989). **Rediscovering Institutions**. New York: The Free Press.

Martin, J. (1992). **The Schoolhome: Rethinking Schools for Changing Families**. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

19

Maynes, W. (1990). **The Education of Edmonton's Urban Poor.** Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

McKall, M. & Kaplan, R. (1985). **Whatever It Takes: Decision Makers at Work.** Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

McLaughlin, M. (1987). Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation. **Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis**, 9(2), 171-178.

Meyer, J. & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. **American Journal of Sociology**, 83(2), 340-363.

Meyer, M., & Zucker, L. (1989). **Permanently Failing Organizations**. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1989.

Miller, D. (1990). **The Icarus Paradox**. New York: HarperCollins.

Mintzberg, H. & Jorgensen, J. (1987). Emergent strategy for public policy. **Canadian Public Administration**, 30, 214-229.

Morgan, G. (1986). **Images of Organization.** Newbury Park: Sage.

Nisbett, R. & Ross, L. (1980). **Human Inferences: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment**. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Pfeffer, J. & Salancik, G. (1978). **The External Control of Organizations: A Resource Dependence Perspective.** New York: Harper and Row.

Ogawa, Rod (1991, April). Implications of an institutional perspective on organizations for examining instructional leadership. Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Rae, P., & Brandon, J. (1991). The dilemma of change. Paper presented to the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Kingston, June.

Schon, D. (1983). **The Reflective Practitioner.** New York: Basic Books.

Shavelson, R. (1988) Conributions of educational research to policy and pracctice: Constructing, challenging, changing cognition. **Educational Researcher,** 17(7), 4-11.

Silverman, D. (1970). **The Theory of Organisations.** London: Heinemann.

Starbuck, W. (1976). Organizations and their environments, in M. Dunnette (ed.), **Handbook of Organizational and Industrial Psychology** (pp. 1069-1125). Chicago: Rand McNally.

Warriner, C. (1984). **Organizations and their Environments: Essays in the Sociology of Organizations.** Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Wildavsky, A. (1973). If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing. **Policy Sciences**, 4(2), 127-153.

Wills, F. (1991, April) Organizational responses to external demands: Strategies employed by superintendents in developing and implementing state mandated improvement plans. Paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Wills, F. & Peterson, K. (1992). External pressures for reform and strategy formation at the district level: Superintendents' interpretations of state demands. **Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis**, 14(3), 241-260.

Wilson, J. (1989). **Bureaucracy**. New York: Basic.